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The Hong Kong Statement on Practice Research 2017: Contexts and Challenges of the Far East

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Abstract

This statement on social work practice research highlights the contributions of scholars, practitioners, and conference participants in the Fourth International Conference on Practice Research (ICPR) in 2017, hosted by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in May 2017. It focuses on the contexts and challenges of carrying out practice research in the Far East and beyond as well as raises pertinent questions about the development of practice research. It begins with a brief description of the context of social work practice research in the Far East. The second part explores the organizational and community contexts and challenges of practice research with special attention to the perspectives of practitioners. It concludes with reviewing some of the continuing challenges that will guide the program planning for the Fifth ICPR in 2020 in Melbourne, Australia, located at the crossroads between East and West.

Keywords

practice research, service users, practitioners, Far East, practice challenges, organizational contexts

The Contexts of Practice Research in the Far East

The debate and advocacy for practice research in social work have taken place primarily in the West (Europe and the United States). The Fourth International Conference on Practice Research (ICPR) hosted by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University included over 265 people from 33 countries and provided the first international venue to capture the perspectives of the Far East. The dialogue was greatly enhanced by the largest involvement of the practitioner community in comparison with the previous international conferences. The conference also provided a unique opportunity for practitioners, academics, and practice researchers from Hong Kong, Mainland China, and other Asian countries to exchange with their Western counterparts up close, while charting their own contribution to the ongoing discourse and debate about practice research and its future trajectories in Asia (Sim, 2016).

The Far East shares similar challenges with the West (demonstrating the social impact, value, and accountability of social work practice) and it also reflects the influence of the West (theories, interventions, textbooks, educators, etc.). Clearly, practice research in the Far East is directly influenced

by the state of social work practice in rapidly growing and changing economies. The four Far East locales represented in this overview include: China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and

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Taiwan, which are predominantly made up of Chinese communities. Since this statement reflects a description of the unique features of countries located within the region of the conference for the first time, more information is located in the Appendix.

Exploring the Organizational and Community Contexts and Challenges of Practice Research

Building upon the first international colloquium on practice research in Salisbury (United Kingdom) in 2008 with 25 invited researchers mainly from Europe, United Kingdom, and United States, the past conferences have generated more interest among researchers as well as practitioners over time. The Hong Kong ICPR in 2017 represents considerable growth in attendance (265 people from 33 countries) and an expanding interest in the development of social work practice research internationally. Given the tradition of creating a conference statement (Epstein et al., 2015; Helsinki Forum Group, 2014; Salisbury Forum Group, 2011) that reflects the issues important in the host country and region, the Far East theme of the Hong Kong conference was developed with this tradition in mind (“Recognizing diversity, developing collaborations, and building networks” of social work practitioners, practitioner–researcher, researchers, and service users; Sim, 2016). The Hong Kong conference built upon the theme of the Third International Conference (Building bridges not pipelines: promoting two-way traffic between practice and research) by including: (a) renowned scholars in the field of practice research from different disciplines; (b) international participants to share their knowledge and skills; (c) workshops, plenaries, social impact discussion forums, and poster presentations to enrich the understanding of participants with different examples of practice research. In its attempt to include more practitioners, the Hong Kong conference engaged a number of professional associations in the region (e.g., China Social Work Academy, Hong Kong Association of Schools of Social Work, Macau Social Workers’ Association, Taiwan Association of Social Workers, Hong Kong Council of Social Service, and the National Council of Social Service [NCSS] of Singapore) to co-organize the conference.

Another innovation developed for the Hong Kong Conference was the effort to involve a group of conference participants, mostly practitioners, at the close of the conference in identifying future challenges related to conducting practice research as noted below (Chin et al., 2017):

1. Featuring the multiple languages of practice:
The change to a more accessible *practice* language has undoubtedly improved the partnership between the researchers and practitioners. The meaning of “practice language” goes beyond the communications between academics and practitioners in English. With a broader international audience being engaged in the conference, culturally and linguistically diverse needs should be addressed because limited proficiency in English can

discourage participants from sharing their ideas. In order to enable the participants to use their first language to voice their views and opinions in discussions, simultaneous interpretation and translation services need to be provided.

2. Increasing the capacities of practitioners to conduct practice research:
Given the daily demands of social work practice, less time and energy are available for conducting practice research even if the practitioners are able and willing. More guidance at future conferences is needed for (a) learning about the conduct of *empirical* practice research; (b) gaining knowledge about access, accuracy, reliability, and funding resources for data collection; and (c) exploring different ways of publishing research results.
3. Understanding the unique contributions of different research stakeholders:
Different stakeholders (service users, policy makers, government, funders, practitioners, and academics) have different purposes in conducting practice research and these differences can make it more difficult for researchers or practitioners to conduct research targeted at specific issues and providing concrete solutions.
4. Enhancing the coordinating and leadership roles of practitioners:
The open dialogue between the academic researchers and practitioners has fostered considerable practice–research collaboration. Practitioners are encouraged to participate in the development of practice-oriented research questions. The increasing involvement of practitioners in assuming leadership roles in promoting practice research in their workplace can be very empowering.

Building on these practitioner observations, the Fifth ICPR (Melbourne, Australia, 2020) has indicated its commitment to addressing these themes and issues. The planning for the next conference includes a focus on supporting practitioners (research question selection, definition, and clarification) in Academic Practitioner Partnerships that promote practice research through the engagement of both practitioners and service users that can enhance the practice research culture in service organizations.

Emerging Questions to Address as We Move On

The process of identifying critical questions about practice research has been a part of the history of our international conferences. Since the First ICPR in 2008 and the creation of the “Salisbury Statement on Practice Research,” the defining and operationalizing of practice research has expanded considerably (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011). The Second ICPR featured the different methodological and theoretical assumptions underpinning practice research and provided opportunities to demonstrate the involvement of service providers and users in the design and implementation of research projects as well as the role of social work research faculty located at local

universities (Helsinki Forum Group, 2014). The Third ICPR held in New York City in 2014 reiterated the need for innovative, flexible, and truly collaborative practice research strategies that engage academic researchers and social work practitioners in a productive dialogue. And the focus of the Fourth ICPR in 2017 expanded the focus on practice by engaging a broader international audience of current researchers, practitioners, users, and decision makers in both government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) regarding the role of practice research in building social work knowledge.

Old and new questions emerged within the context of the Fourth ICPR that provided expanded perspectives on practice research, especially the ongoing question: What is practice research? As new conference participants, countries and disciplines engage in developing the concept of practice research, the question will continue to emerge and benefit from ongoing refinement, reflecting the strengths of this form of research as well as the value of ongoing innovations/improvements in various localities. New perspectives and ways of understanding and evaluating social work practice are also required in different contexts. It is exactly this unique strength that practice research is able to bring different stakeholders with diverse backgrounds and different views together. In other words, it is essential for practice research to pay attention to the different ways that practice research has been employed in different contexts and settings. It also focuses attention on the changing dynamics of social work practice. For instance, based on the early stage of professional social work development in Mainland China, it is evident that practice research is a new phenomenon and therefore will reflect an evolving process of practice research that may differ from other parts of the world. One of the goals of practice research (and the periodic conference statements like this one) is to highlight a variety of contexts and challenges facing practice research. Practice research involves negotiating diversity and promoting understanding while also respecting the different contexts and realities for engaging in practice research. The efforts to further refine the definition of practice research should continue at the next international conference in Melbourne, Australia, in 2020. Implicit in this search for a meaningful clarification of practice research is the process of educating students in ways that increase their practice research competence and confidence (both classroom and fieldwork) and thereby contribute to a practice research culture within their future workplaces that includes continuing exploration and rigorous examination of practice research definitions and methodologies.

Questions to Guide the Planning of Future Conferences

Practice Research Methodologies

What are the different epistemologies and methods relevant to practice research in different parts of the world, given unique contexts and the development of social work practice? What

role does continuing education play in the development of practice research capacities in different social work communities? To what extent is practice carried out by students in their field practice a type of practice research (vis-à-vis a piece of educational output)? Is participatory action research a part of practice research or the other way around? In the Helsinki Statement, it was concluded that:

The theoretical and methodological framework for practice research calls for flexible and collaborative structures and organizations. Therefore practice research cannot be captured by a single philosophy or methodology, but will rather connect itself towards philosophies and methodologies defining practice-based knowledge and supporting flexible organizations and understandings. (Helsinki Forum Group, 2014, p. 8).

Practice Research Contexts

It has become increasingly clear, especially at the Hong Kong conference that more attention needs to be given to the context of practice research around the world given both the diverse political and cultural contexts and the different stages of social work development as a profession. Each locale will probably develop a slightly different mix of the ingredients of practice and research. The changing demands on practice research enterprise also need future consideration. For example, how does practice research account for the shift in funder interests from output to outcome research, especially using the new language of social impact designed to address both policy and community? What attention is being paid to the dissemination and utilization/implementation of practice research beyond the traditional use of agency reports and peer-review journal articles? While social impact assessment is the process of analyzing and managing the intended and unintended consequences on the human environment of planned interventions (policies, programs, plans, and projects), social change processes call upon those engaged in practice research to be equally skilled at articulating the underlying “theory of change” guiding the provision of services. Future directions in the development of practice research call for increased attention to articulating “theory-informed practice” in addition to the building of theoretical frameworks for measurement in the collaborations between practitioners, researchers, and service users.

Role of Practitioners in Practice Research

The third question that emerged in this process is: What is the role of practitioners in developing practice research? Based on the experience of the Hong Kong conference, it is clear that practitioners need to be more actively engaged in the development of practice research (Chin et al., 2017). Particular attention needs to be given to the language used to describe practice research in a way that reflects the interests of practitioners. As a result, it is recommended that more practitioners should be actively involved in the planning and implementation of the

Melbourne conference in 2020 based on the local history of long-standing partnerships between university researchers and “practitioners as partners.”

Role of Service Users in Practice Research

Another question is gaining increasing interest, namely, what is the role of service users in shaping practice research given unique political and social processes? Some of the questions emerging in the Hong Kong conference included: (a) How and when do we talk about service user involvement in practice research? (b) Are we involving service users as research informants or as active research team members (influencing the design, the research question etcetera)? (c) Is practice research about giving service users a voice through research and are there parallels to involvement and democratic processes? These questions could also guide future conference planning.

Conclusions

This statement has been jointly compiled by the Conference Organizing Committee as well as the presenters and participants attending the Fourth ICPR in Hong Kong. One of the unique contributions of the Hong Kong conference is the call to highlight the “state of social work practice” in relationship to the “state of social work practice research” since they are linked in more complex ways than had been considered in past conferences. It is apparent that practice research is lodged in a context which includes the developmental stages of social work practice as well as the cultural, sociopolitical and economic forces at play. Another contribution of the Hong Kong conference is the growing recognition of the need for more involvement by both practitioners and service users in our continuing efforts to define practice research and contribute to the knowledge development of social work practice.

Appendix

The Status of Practice Research in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan

China. Social work is at an early stage of professional development in China (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2008). After decades of civil wars and the Cultural Revolution, it was reintroduced by the Chinese government to universities in 1986 with the hope that graduates with a professional background of social work could contribute to alleviating the acute social problems caused by the drastic socioeconomic changes after its economy grew at a breakneck speed (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2008). In 2006, the Chinese government formally acknowledged the importance of “building up a strong team of social workers to help in the development of the harmonious society” with “education as priority” in its social work development model in China (Shi, 2012, p. 17). It is believed that professional autonomy of social work needs to be strengthened for it to become an independent discipline, combining specialization and localization, theory and practice in China (Peng, 2017). Practice research has the

potential to speed up this process of strengthening the professional autonomy of social work (Sim & Lau, 2017).

With a total of 206 practice research publications between 1999 and 2014, Sim and Lau (2017) reported that practice research is still fledgling in China. In a context where practice research is just beginning, challenges are expected. First, there is a lack of coherence and clear definition of practice research concepts such as “practice research,” “intervention research,” “action research,” and the like. Social workers in China are apparently unclear about the different yet apparently related concepts and question what is the difference between intervention research and practice research? Is action research part of practice research or the other way around? This confusion and obscurity has led to an alternate use between action research and practice research in current Chinese social work literature (Sim & Lau, 2017). Finally, inadequate institutional support undermines the development of practice research in the long run. Currently, there are few training courses and textbooks on practice research for social work students, social work educators are also lacking adequate training in practice research and in academic writing, compounded by the fact many of the university teachers have little practice experience.

Hong Kong. Social work arrived in Hong Kong as a direct consequence of colonization, but the colonial government did not take any major initiative regarding social work until 1960s (Lam & Blyth, 2014). In 1997, Hong Kong was returned to the motherland after 100 years of British colonial rule. By then, it has a well-developed social service system with a myriad of programs and services to respond to the emerging psychosocial needs of its 7 million inhabitants (Leung, 2007). The development of practice research matches the different stages of social work advancement in Hong Kong (Wang, 2004), as journal articles on practice steadily increased between 1966 and 2016 (Chan & Sim, under review). However, these publications featuring practice research initiatives had been mostly academic-led.

Since practice research operates at the crossroads between practice and research, there is a need for joint efforts from both parties and negotiation between them (Drisko, 2014). Hong Kong is in the process of benefiting from overseas models of collaboration (Joubert & Hocking, 2015; Helsinki Forum Group, 2014). As with its Western counterparts, the research funding by the government and the community is impacted by globalization and its socioeconomic circumstances. In 2001, the Hong Kong government implemented a new funding system (Lump-Sum Grant), which shifted the focus of service monitoring from “input” to “output” to delivery of quality service, which is not dissimilar to other western countries where neoconservative welfare regime prevails and the “small government” is heralded (Chui, Tsang, & Mok, 2010). This move to reduce costs and funding is believed to have long-term adverse effects on the quality and stability of social services in Hong Kong (Chui et al., 2010; Leung, 2002). By 2020, all universities are expected to account for the social impact of their research, as a result of adopting the Research Excellence

Framework used in the United Kingdom since 2014. These challenges, faced by both academics and practitioners, include the quest for effective practices (Lam & Blyth, 2014), need to demonstrate social impact, the managerialism and accountability associated with grants (Yan, Cheung, Tsui, & Chu, 2017), and the complicated and uncertain nature of funding (Lam & Blyth, 2014). But there is also a huge opportunity for Hong Kong to share its experience in developing social work practice and research with China (Chui et al., 2010) and probably its neighboring counterparts including Taiwan (Wang, 2004) and Singapore.

Singapore. Like Hong Kong, Singapore is an island state with a population of about 5 million, has a colonial legacy, including for its social service and social work education. Since the social work discipline debuted with the setup of the Department of Social Work at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1953, the social work sector has been evolving into one that not only focuses on delivering good practice but also examines closely the other three critical components of social work: formulation of policies, advocating for social causes, and research. The Singapore government adopts the “Many Helping Hands” approach in its social service provision, where assistance is provided by various stakeholders including the government, community organizations, voluntary groups, concerned citizens, and family members (Lim, 2007). The importance of cultivating practitioner–researcher collaborations to widen the sources of social work knowledge production has been acknowledged by different ministry divisions (personal communication). The government is keen to promote practice research. As an example of this, the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), a statutory board of the Singaporean government with over 460 member social service organizations under its wing, has been actively working with a coalition of local practice research enthusiasts to resource and plan engagement efforts among social work practitioners to promote awareness in practice research and to document key issues and challenges faced in conducting practice research in the social and health sector.

Practice research in Singapore has been employed as a means to strengthen service quality, account to service users and donors and build public confidence, and for the continuous learning of social work practitioners. While governmental and academic institutions have been active in promoting practice research (Tan, 2017), bottom-up practice research projects are limited and concentrated in a few social service organizations. While funding opportunities are available, there can be more support for practice research in terms of time given for practice research to be conducted and the technical support given to the practitioners. Efforts have already started recently. For example, the Social Service Research Centre, based in Department of Social Work at the NUS, works closely with NGOs in designing a project, writing a grant and applying for ethical approval, and more access to up-to-date research databases to carry out literature reviews in recent years. Today, there are two grants in Singapore which aim to support practice research:

(i) the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Endowed Research Fund was established in 2016 to motivate scholars to proactively engage practitioners to conduct practice research to be adapted into training materials to transfer knowledge to students and other professionals (NUS, 2017) and (ii) the NCSS-administered Voluntary Welfare Organizations (VWOs)-Charities Capability Fund that supports practice research projects undertaken by social service organizations and incentivizes collaborative research. However, there is still a need for an active centralized sharing platform to allow interorganizational collaboration for the dissemination of findings with one another. However, a quick review from the *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, published 4 times a year by the Department of Social Work of the NUS, in collaboration with the Asian and Pacific Association for Social Work Education since 1991, yielded few articles on practice research by both the academics and practitioners in Singapore. A quick search on practice research published in international journals by social workers related to Singapore is not more promising (Sim, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Sim & Ng, 2008) when compared to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Taiwan. The modern social work profession began to take shape in Taiwan in 1949 and reflects two developmental pathways, namely, governmental social administration and “American-style” social work education and practice (Cheng, 2007). As a result, the social work profession in Taiwan reflects a dependence on the party-state institutions to achieve its legitimacy in the society and features of the American education and knowledge production system (e.g., Epstein, 2010). The nature of social work practice has also evolved from rigid governmental social control to a flexible form of individualizing services. While practitioners support the importance of social work research, only one-third of them found existing academic research useful in meeting their needs in practice (Y. C. Zhang, 2006; Zhao, 1992).

Practice research efforts are mostly led and undertaken by academics in Taiwan. Y. C. Zhang (2006) examined the articles between 1994 and 2004 in social work–related journals, only 40 of them are related to the study or evaluation of social work practice. Government-funded programs increasingly emphasize the importance of involving both practitioners and academic researchers in service projects (Y. Z. Zhang & Hsu, 2004). Both academic researchers and practitioners are urged to consider research as a tool for practice, rather than consider practice as an object of research (Epstein, 1995). Social workers are encouraged to be the user and producer of knowledge to inform and evaluate their practices and contribute to knowledge development, especially in medical settings that feature evidence-based practices. There is a general lack of organizational support, resources, funding, and facilitators to motivate and guide research-minded practitioners. Given the history of the two development pathways related to government-supported social services and university-supported social work education, it has been difficult to narrow the gap between practice and research in Taiwan.

Consolidating the Challenges in Practice Research of the Far East

Practice research is a new enterprise in the Far East, particularly China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, due to the relatively brief history of social work that has been imported from the West with limited efforts to tailor to local needs with services and university education heavily subsidized by the government. As a result, practice research is mainly led by academics with a minimal role played by practitioners, and the role of the service users in practice research is almost nonexistent. Given the many common social, economic, and cultural characteristics of the countries and regions in the Far East, the international conference provided a platform for a process of continuing exchange in the region with regard to the development of practice research (Chui et al., 2010; Lam & Blyth, 2014; Wang, 2004).


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